

A LIFE WORTH LIVING

I feel BAD for Peter. HE was the most PROMINENT of ALL the disciples; his name OFTEN appears in the gospels. But MOST of the time, he looks like a DUNCE. He's quick to SPEAK, but USUALLY puts his FOOT in his mouth! He's quick to ACT, but USUALLY trips over his own FEET! And OVER the centuries, millions (maybe even BILLIONS) of people have known his NAME and just kind of SHAKEN their heads hearing all the stories about his THICK-headedness. Yes, POOR Peter!

We're NOW at MID-POINT in Mark's gospel, and UNTIL now, JESUS has been doing what we would EXPECT Jesus to DO. He's been preaching and teaching and healing ALL around the REGION of the Sea of Galilee. But NOW, Jesus suddenly CHANGES, and begins TEACHING them that He must SUFFER and DIE. But when PETER hears it, he's not HAPPY about it. And can you BLAME him? BEFORE meeting JESUS, He was living COMFORTABLY in Capernaum! He had a FAMILY and was running a SMALL, but successful FISHING business! And he was PROBABLY quite CONTENT with his life! But then, ALONG comes JESUS! And Jesus INVITES him to become a DISCIPLE. And PETER is so MOVED by Jesus that he leaves EVERYTHING and FOLLOWS Him.

As time goes ON, Peter begins to see the true GREATNESS of Jesus and wonders if Jesus MIGHT just be the MESSIAH, if Jesus MIGHT just be the One for whom they'd been WAITING for SO long, the ONE who is to REDEEM Israel from **the** MEDIOCRITY into which that nation has fallen; the NEW King DAVID, God's Anointed, who will raise up an ARMY, and (with GOD at His side) drive OUT the DESPISED Roman soldiers who OCCUPY their beloved country. And the MORE Peter sees Jesus at WORK, the MORE it comes CLEAR to him that Jesus IS this promised MESSIAH.

And FINALLY, in our Scripture Lesson TODAY, Jesus asks His disciples: **WHO do PEOPLE say that I AM?** And after hearing their responses (John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets), Jesus asks THEM: **But who do YOU say that I am?** And suddenly, Peter finds WITHIN himself the COURAGE to voice his secret HOPE and BELIEF: **YOU? YOU are the MESSIAH!** And Jesus does NOT deny it, but simply tells His disciples to keep QUIET about it. *SO*, thinks Peter, *AHA! This IS the long-awaited MESSIAH! And THAT means that the TURNING point MUST be coming SOON, because IF He IS the Messiah, He HAS to ACT! And SOON, the whole WORLD will see what I already KNOW, and THEN, my beloved ISRAEL will become GREAT once again! YEAH!* And he's EXCITED!

HOWEVER, THEN Jesus goes on and begins TEACHING them that *He must undergo great SUFFERING; and be REJECTED by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes; and be KILLED, and after 3 days RISE again.* Well, let me ask YOU: *how would YOU feel if YOU had pinned ALL your HOPES on someone, ONLY to have that someone SAY such a thing as THAT? How would YOU feel if you sacrificed EVERYTHING to follow someone, who NOW starts planning for FAILURE?* I mean: YOU'D feel like an INVESTOR, who has invested EVERYTHING in Bernard Madoff's PONZI scheme! YOU'D feel BETRAYED, frustrated, FURIOUS! BUT, Peter knows that it's NOT too LATE. The stock hasn't CRASHED yet! Jesus isn't DEAD yet! MAYBE He's just having a bad DAY. EVERYBODY has bad DAYS! SO, Peter takes Jesus ASIDE and talks with Him PRIVATELY -- a nice touch. We ALL ought to do that FIRST. No need to EMBARRASS Jesus publicly. Now, Mark doesn't TELL us what Peter SAYS, but maybe it's something like: *Come on, Jesus! You're just having a bad DAY! Get a GRIP! Get some SLEEP! Just don't do anything STUPID when you feel like THIS!*

Well, what happens NEXT must have SURPRISED Peter, because Jesus suddenly turns and REBUKES Peter: **Get behind me, Satan, for YOU are setting your mind, NOT on DIVINE things, but on HUMAN things!** And THEN Jesus goes ON: **If ANY want to become MY followers, let them**

DENY themselves and take up their CROSS and follow ME. For THOSE who want to SAVE their life will LOSE it, and those who LOSE their life for MY sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will SAVE it. For WHAT will it PROFIT them to GAIN the whole WORLD, and forfeit their LIFE?

Now, I doubt that ANY of that made ANY sense to PETER. But even if Jesus HAD been in the mood for a DISCUSSION (which He obviously WASN'T), WHAT would Peter have SAID to Him? I doubt that he would have known WHAT to say, any more than WE would know WHAT to say. And WE have the advantage of 2000 YEARS of Christianity! But sometimes, we STILL don't get it, DO we? Sometimes WE are JUST as resistant as PETER to talking about the CROSS and suffering and SACRIFICE. But isn't being a Christian SUPPOSED to be difficult? Isn't that what Jesus is TELLING His disciples here? So, WHY do we have such a hard time thinking that we might have to SUFFER for our faith?

IS it because we live in a culture that tries to AVOID pain at all costs? Give me PAIN-KILLERS! Give me ANTI-DEPRESSANTS! Give me DRUGS! Give me ADDICTIONS! Give me more LUXURIES and TOYS and TRIPS, so that I can be HAPPY! But DOESN'T being a Christian MEAN that we sometimes HAVE to DO things that our CULTURE thinks are just plain STUPID, (and things that CERTAINLY won't FEEL very good) in order to serve a HIGHER purpose? I had a young woman in my LAST church who taught in an inner CITY school in New York, where she made just a pittance for herself and then had to spend her OWN money to buy the kids something to WRITE with. **WHY?** She could have had it SO much easier teaching in the SUBURBS! But it wasn't ABOUT her! It was about the CHILDREN she taught, and the FAITH she professed, and the higher PURPOSE she served! My daughter, Lyndsey, is one of her best friends. They were in Confirmation Class and youth group together. And at the SAME time as her friend was teaching in New YORK, Lyndsey was off working with the POOR, with an indigenous Ecuadorian TRIBE on the Amazon River, to HELP them ORGANIZE and become fair trade COFFEE and CHOCOLATE producers, so that they could break FREE from the grip of POVERTY and SUSTAIN themselves as a community. **WHY?** It doesn't affect us HERE? **WHY** should she CARE? But it's not ABOUT Lyndsey! And it's NOT about US! It's about the POOR, who are ALSO God's children! And it's about a HIGHER purpose! Another example: there are MANY people (Diane and I included) who MARCH, and SOME even go to JAIL, trying to CLOSE down the *School of the Americas* (what is now WHINSEC) at Fort Benning, Georgia. **WHY?** We love our country and support our troops. But it's not about US! That school is an embarrassment! It's TRAINED most of the BUTCHERS, who have tortured, raped and killed MASSES of people in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and many OTHER countries, including now Colombia. Well, why should WE care? WE don't live there. BUT, being a Christian MEANS caring for ALL God's children, SO much that we sometimes HAVE to stand UP for JUSTICE, even when it's not POPULAR, and even when it's CONTRARY to LAWS of our EMPIRE? As Donald Wildmon said: *At the very heart of the Christian gospel is a CROSS -- the SYMBOL of suffering and sacrifice, hurt and pain, humiliation and rejection. I want NO part of a Christian message which does NOT call me to INVOLVEMENT, which requires OF me NO sacrifice, which takes FROM me NO comfort, or which requires OF me LESS than the BEST I have to GIVE. The DUTY of a Christian is to be FAITHFUL, NOT popular or successful.* And friends, that's TRUE whether we do our loving and serving in far off places or right here at HOME, because there's PLENTY of serving and caring to do right here in this CHURCH, right here in this TOWN, right here in this STATE. And it's ALL important, both HERE and FAR OFF!

So, what SUSTAINS and EMPOWERS us to ENDURE the suffering that our Christian faith MAY require of us? Well, Peter had JESUS there to empower him, telling him that, in 3 days, He would RISE again. And WE, of course, have the TESTIMONY of those FIRST disciples, who TELL us that the CROSS was followed by the EMPTY tomb and VISIONS of Jesus! And we KNOW that these 2 stories are MEANT to be COMBINED, and that the COMBINED stories of Jesus' crucifixion and

resurrection **form** God's eternal METAPHOR. They are GOD'S way of REVEALING to us that GOD is at WORK in the midst of EVERY crucifixion (and there are so MANY every single DAY in this world, in this CHURCH, and even in our OWN lives). But, GOD is at work IN them, weaving FROM them NEW life, weaving some kind of RESURRECTION! And we know that THIS is God's eternal TRUTH, that THIS is God's EVERLASTING Good News. And we gather here, week after week, to HEAR it and proclaim it, again and again! And it's this GOOD news, this GREAT news, this LIFE-GIVING news, this HOPE-FILLED news, that EMPOWERS us to KEEP doing and saying what we NEED to be doing and saying as FAITHFUL followers of Jesus Christ! And this GOOD news can SUSTAIN us through WHATEVER discomfort, WHATEVER pain, and WHATEVER suffering our discipleship may BRING us. Yes, it's THIS Good News, this eternal METAPHOR of HOW God works in the world that ENABLES us to become the disciples that Jesus CHALLENGES us to become. And WHEN we TRULY follow Him, WE learn a POWERFUL truth, a TRUTH that enables to have *a life worth living* and FULLness of life.

Marian Preminger learned this great TRUTH. Marian Preminger was the WIFE of Otto Preminger, the famous Hollywood director. Born to a WEALTHY family in Hungary and raised in a CASTLE with servants, Marian became an actress, married Otto Preminger, and came to the United States. Unfortunately, however, she got caught up in the TAWDRY side of Hollywood life, and Otto ended up divorcing her. SO, in 1948, Marian moved to Paris and became a wealthy SOCIALITE. Well, one day, she saw a newspaper article about *Albert Schweitzer* and his return to Europe for a VISIT from his MISSION in Africa. SO, she made arrangements to MEET him, and that meeting CHANGED her life. When Schweitzer returned to Africa, Marian ACCOMPANIED him -- to WORK in his hospital. And there, SHE, who had NEVER had to cook a meal or sweep a floor, spent her life changing BANDAGES and diapers, feeding BABIES, and treating LEPERS. It was a VERY hard life, but IN that humble life of SERVING others, Marian FINALLY found what SHE called *a life worth LIVING*. And she LOVED that life! When she died in 1979, the *New York Times* ran her OBITUARY, and it included THESE words from her autobiography: *Albert Schweitzer said there are two classes of people in this world -- helpers and non-helpers. Well, I am a helper!* Friends, THESE are the words of a woman who had it ALL, but who found that the ONLY *life worth LIVING* is a life of GIVING and SERVING!

And SO, if YOU would like to have what SHE called *a life worth LIVING*, follow JESUS, EVEN when it means SERVING, even when it means GIVING, even when it means SACRIFICE, even when it means SUFFERING, and EVEN when it means enduring some kind of CRUCIFIXION. And REALIZE, as John Shea said: *Whenever people EXPEND themselves, they want RESULTS. IF they lay DOWN life, they want SOMEONE'S life raised up. IF they EMPTY themselves, they want SOMEONE to be FILLED. They want their suffering to bear FRUIT. IF this doesn't HAPPEN, they're tempted to give UP. The REFUSAL of the gift quickly becomes a reason NOT to OFFER it. Instead of leaning INTO resistance with LOVE, they'll back OFF and say, "Well, we TRIED." However, the motive for offering LOVE is NOT that it be SUCCESSFUL. Christians WANT response, but they are not BOUND to it. They SACRIFICE for others because they are the RECIPIENTS of sacrifice. They are the current generation of a long LINE of BROKEN bodies and SHED blood. This GIFT Christians have received, they freely GIVE. They join the LIVING history of people ENACTING the dream of GOD, people sustained and transformed by MUTUAL, sacrificial LOVE -- people sustained and transformed by their TRUST in a God who WORKS in the midst of EVERY crucifixion, EVERY kind of suffering, to bring forth NEW life and WEAVE resurrections. Friends, don't ARGUE with Jesus, as PETER did. Just FOLLOW Jesus, as Peter ultimately WOULD. And YOU will have what Marian Preminger called *a LIFE worth LIVING*, and a FULL life, EVEN if it's not an EASY one. AMEN.*